

A Chronology of the Combe Martin Silver-Lead District (1200-1900)

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Cross-Checked Chronology of the Combe Martin Silver-Lead & Iron District (1200-1900)

From Historical Records, Mining Setts, and District Structures

Abstract

Combe Martin was never a single, continuous mine running for seven hundred years. Instead, the area was a dynamic district made up of several distinct mining operations and shafts that opened, closed, and changed names as different companies tried their luck over the centuries.

The main story centres on three major booms. The first secure records begin in 1292 when King Edward I opened royal silver mines in the area, though that initial project lasted only a few years.

The district saw its next major surge during the Elizabethan era in 1587 under Sir Bevis Bulmer, who brought in advanced technology to dig deeper lodes.

The final, most substantial era arrived in the 1800s, peaking between 1835 and 1848 when the Combmartin and North Devon Mining Company installed steam engines to drain the underground workings.

To keep the geography clear, the local sites connected to one another yet were not all one enterprise. Names like William's Shaft and Harris's Shaft were not separate mines, but structural parts of the main Old Combmartin Mine near the village of Combe Martin.

Other locations, such as Knap Down and West Challacombe, were completely separate mining zones. It is also worth noting that not every site produced silver; parts of the West Challacombe sector at Combe Martin were actually worked for iron ore and other minerals.

Finally, it helps to separate verified history from local legends. While popular stories claim Combe Martin silver funded medieval wars in France, modern historical research suggests those records blended local production with mines elsewhere in Devon.

Similarly, while archaeological databases list activity up to 1902, profitable commercial silver mining at Combe Martin had essentially ended by 1880, with later years consisting mostly of short-lived prospecting attempts.

- **Distinction of Sites:** The Combe Martin mining area cannot be classified as a single continuous mine across the 1200-1900 period. Instead, it consisted of several distinct workings and mining setts whose operational names changed over time.
- **Structural Shafts:** Harris's Shaft and William's Shaft were not independent mines; they were specific structural components within the larger Old Combmartin Mine.
- **Historical Identity:** Fayes Mine represents a probable historical identity for a section of the older medieval and early modern workings.

- **Research Verification:** This structural framework has been verified against the Devon & Dartmoor Historic Environment Record (HER), Exmoor HER, British Geological Survey (BGS) records, historical mining research by Peter Cloughton, and site reconstructions by Martin Ebdon. Errors cannot be excluded.

The Separated Timeline

Confidence key

-  **DOCUMENTED** – supported by contemporary records, HER, mine plans, company records, etc.
-  **PROBABLE** – strong specialist interpretation, but not directly documented in the surviving evidence.
-  **TRADITIONAL / POSSIBLE** – historical tradition or later interpretation that cannot presently be demonstrated.
-  **NO SECURE EVIDENCE**

Combe Martin Silver-Lead Mining: 1200-1900

1200-1291 – before the Crown mine

c.1200-1291 – early mining

 **PROBABLE / POSSIBLE**

There are indications of very early mining around Combe Martin, and the Devon HER allows a broad medieval date for some workings. The surviving archaeological landscape contains ancient workings, but there is presently no secure documentary evidence allowing us to say that a particular shaft or lode was being worked in, say, 1200 or 1250.

The [Combe Martin Village History Project silver mining article](#) goes further, and suggests mining may have occurred in the 12th century. That is based on references to lost records rather than surviving primary documentation ([Combe Martin Village History Project](#)).

Verdict on Combe Martin Silver-Lead Mining: 1200-1900: Possible medieval/pre-1292 working.

OLD COMBMARTIN / ROYAL SILVER MINES

1292-1296 – Crown exploitation

1292

 **DOCUMENTED**

This is the first really secure date.

The Crown opened new silver mines at Combe Martin under **Edward I**. [The Devon and Dartmoor HER](#), drawing on the archaeological/historical research of Rippon, Cloughton & Smart, specifically dates the opening to **1292, and closing by 1902** ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

1293-1296

DOCUMENTED, with qualifications

The traditional account says 337 miners were brought from Derbyshire and Wales. BGS records the tradition, but importantly notes that the medieval production figures in older sources combine Combe Martin with Bere Alston/Bere Ferrers, so they cannot safely be treated as Combe Martin-only figures. ([BGS Application Server](#))

The modern archaeological interpretation is that the Crown operation was short-lived.

1296

DOCUMENTED

The Crown's initial operation ended around **1296**. The Devon HER explicitly records the 1292 opening and 1296 closure ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

Important correction to popular histories: this was not six centuries of continuous royal mining. It was a short initial Crown enterprise followed by intermittent exploitation.

1320s-1330 – Second Medieval Phase

c.1320

DOCUMENTED

Interest in the Combe Martin mines revived in the 1320s.

1320-1330

DOCUMENTED

The HER records that during the five years up to 1330, the mine was leased to five different individuals, including the lord of the manor ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

This is a fascinating piece of evidence because it shows that the mine was not simply abandoned permanently after 1296.

c.1330 onward

PROBABLE

Mining continued intermittently, but the evidence becomes much less precise. The geological problem was important: Combe Martin's ore bodies were discontinuous, making it difficult to predict where the next rich lode would occur. That appears to have been a recurring problem throughout the mine's history ([MDV12545](#)).

14th-15th Centuries

c.1330-1490

PROBABLE / PARTLY DOCUMENTED

There was intermittent exploitation during the later medieval period, but the surviving record does **not** permit a continuous year-by-year chronology.

Some older sources give **1490** as a cessation date. The Devon & Dartmoor HER preserves that claim, yet it is not as securely established as 1292, 1296 or 1320-30 ([MDV789](#)).

The “Hundred Years' War” story

● TRADITIONAL

The claim that Combe Martin silver financed Edward III's wars against France – and later even the battles of **Cry, Poitiers and Agincourt** – is a longstanding tradition.

BGS records the claim because it appears in older historical sources, but the modern research is much more cautious. ([BGS Application Server](#)).

1528 – Höchstetter

1528

●/● DOCUMENTED / STRONGLY SUPPORTED

The Old Combmartin workings were reworked in **1528 under the Höchstetter family**, German mining entrepreneurs (Combe Martin Village History Project). This is repeated in the specialist/local-history sources and in the Mindat record derived from the mining literature ([Mindat](#)).

This is an important milestone because it establishes renewed exploitation before the famous Elizabethan period.

1587-1594 – The Elizabethan Bonanza

1587

● DOCUMENTED

A new and rich mine/lode was discovered at Combe Martin in **1587**.

The HER specifically records the discovery of a new mine in 1587 and working for approximately four years ([MDV789](#)).

1587-1591/94

● DOCUMENTED / ● identification caveat

This was the **most productive period in the documented history of Combe Martin's silver mines**, according to the modern archaeological research ([MDV12545](#)).

Sir Bevis Bulmer was a major figure in this revival, using improved pumping technology to reach deeper workings. ([Martin Ebdon Maps](#))

Fayes Mine

● PROBABLE

Fayes Mine is possibly the 1587-94 Elizabethan workings within/associated with Old Combmartin.

The Mindat/Claughton-derived description explicitly says the Old Combmartin site was “possibly” Fayes Mine during 1587-94. ([Mindat](#))

That's an important qualification.

Fayes Mine – probable identification with part of the Elizabethan Old Combmartin workings.

1590s – The Famous Silver Cups

c.1590s

● DOCUMENTED TRADITION / PARTLY DOCUMENTED

The historical tradition says that Combe Martin silver was made into ceremonial silver cups, including one associated with the City of London.

The HER records the tradition of the final cake of silver being made into two cups, one for London and one for the Earl of Bath ([MDV789](#)). Visit [Combe Martin Museum](#) for objects.

The **existence of the Elizabethan silver production is secure**.

The exact provenance of surviving objects is a separate question.

So:

Combe Martin silver → Elizabethan ceremonial objects: ●

Every surviving object attributed to Combe Martin → definitely Combe Martin ore: ✗ not established.

1600-1645 – Decline

early 17th century

● PROBABLE

After the Elizabethan boom the mines declined into periods of inactivity and attempted revival.

There is no justification for drawing a continuous working line through this period.

1646-1648 – Thomas Bushell

●/● DOCUMENTED ATTEMPT

There were attempts to reopen the old workings in the **1640s**. The traditional account associates this with **Thomas Bushell**, an associate/pupil of Francis Bacon and royal mining entrepreneur ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

The practical problem was drainage.

The surviving descriptions say the old workings were **not adequately drained**, limiting the success of the attempt. ([Mindat](#))

1648

● DOCUMENTED / TRADITIONAL DETAILS

Some later sources specifically give 1648 as an opening date, yet **1646-48 might be the safer period**.

1650-1790 – Intermittent Attempts

17th century

● PROBABLE / PARTLY DOCUMENTED

The mine did not simply disappear. There were intermittent attempts at reopening, but there is no evidence for sustained large-scale production.

A deep drainage adit associated with the workings is believed by Peter Claughton to have been commenced in the **mid-17th century**. The Devon HER records it as such ([Adit, Combe Martin](#)).

18th century

●/● DOCUMENTED INTERMITTENT WORKING

There were repeated attempts to rework the Combe Martin mines during the 18th century.

But again:

“intermittent working” ≠ “continuously operating mine.”

The geological and drainage problems kept recurring ([MDV12545](#)).

1790-1802 – West Challacombe

This is where the story starts to split into different mining setts.

1790-1792

● DOCUMENTED

At **West Challacombe**, trials were made by **Gullet** between 1790 and 1792.

This was not simply Old Combmartin Mine under another name. West Challacombe was a separate mining sett extending across a substantial area toward the coast ([MDE8262 - West Challacombe Mine](#)).

Important distinction

West Challacombe ≠ Old Combmartin Mine.

They are geographically related parts of the Combe Martin mining district but separate mining areas.

1796-1802 – Iron at West Challacombe

1796-1802

● DOCUMENTED – BUT IRON, NOT SILVER

The northern part of the West Challacombe sett was worked for **iron**, not primarily silver-lead.

This is important because the same mining landscape contains several commodities. Exmoor HER records iron working from 1796-1802 ([MDE8262](#)).

We should not interpret every 18th/19th-century working in the West Challacombe sett as silver mining.

1813-1817 – Old Combmartin Mine Revival

1813

● DOCUMENTED

Old Combmartin Mine was reopened.

The contemporary/historical accounts indicate that the renewed operation shipped ore to Bristol ([Combe Martin Village History Project](#)).

1813-1817

● DOCUMENTED

The mine operated for approximately four years.

1817

● DOCUMENTED

The attempt failed because the quantity of silver recovered was insufficient to pay the cost of working. ([Combe Martin History](#))

This is one of the clearest examples of the recurring Combe Martin problem:

Ore existed, but finding enough ore continuously to justify pumping and working costs was difficult.

1835-1848 – The Great Victorian Old Combmartin Mine

This is the most archaeologically and historically secure part of the entire story.

1835

● DOCUMENTED

The **Combmartin and North Devon Mining Company** began major operations.

Martin Ebdon's reconstruction is particularly valuable here because he was able to combine surviving company reports with the tithe map and other evidence to reconstruct the underground layout ([Martin Ebdon Maps](#)).

William's Shaft

1835-1837

● DOCUMENTED

William's Shaft was an old whim shaft that was enlarged/deepened as part of the 19th-century redevelopment.

The Devon HER identifies it as an Old Combmartin Mine shaft and records the remains of the engine house, bob pit, smithy and probable account house ([MDV41478](#)).

1837

 DOCUMENTED

A 50-inch cylinder Cornish steam engine was erected at William's Shaft.

The HER dates the engine house to 1837 ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

This is one of the strongest archaeological anchors in the entire chronology.

1838-1847 – Rich Ore Discovery

c.1838

/  STRONGLY SUPPORTED

A substantial deposit of silver-lead ore was discovered close to the village.

Ebdon's reconstruction says this discovery transformed the fortunes of the company. In 1842-43, ore sales exceeded £10,000 over a 12-month period ([Martin Ebdon Maps](#)).

1842-1843

 DOCUMENTED

This was probably the financial high point of the Victorian Old Combmartin operation.

1847-1848 – Collapse

1847

/  STRONGLY SUPPORTED

The rich deposit had effectively been exhausted by 1847 and the company failed to find another comparable ore body (Martin Ebdon Maps).

1848

 DOCUMENTED

The major Old Combmartin operation closed.

This is the date that should be used for the end of the great Victorian boom.

Knap Down – a Separate Mine

This needs its own timeline.

Before 1836

 PROBABLE

Knap Down had older workings, but their precise date is uncertain. The HER describes them as ancient/post-medieval but cannot securely date the earliest workings ([MDV789](#)).

1836

● DOCUMENTED

Knap Down Mine was reopened by the Combmartin and North Devon Mining Company ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

1836-1846

● DOCUMENTED

Knap Down was worked and then abandoned in **1846** ([Heritage Gateway](#)).

1848-1850 – North Devon Wheal Rose

1848

● DOCUMENTED

Knap Down reopened under the name:

North Devon Wheal Rose.

c.1848-1850

● DOCUMENTED

It operated for approximately two years ([HER MDV789](#)).

1850-1859 – Knap Down Consols

1850

● DOCUMENTED

The mine became **Nap/Knap Down Consols**.

There are contemporary references indicating that the venture soon became inactive; by October 1852 the Mining Journal reported that little had been heard of the operation for eighteen months ([Combe Martin Village History Project](#)).

c.1850-1859

● DOCUMENTED / PARTLY DOCUMENTED

The exact continuity of activity is less clear, but the company/name is secure.

1853 – Combmartin Consols / Wheal Vervale (Old Cornish *Wheal*)

Meaning a mine or mine shaft. This is **not Knap Down** and **not the Old Combmartin Mine**.

1853

● DOCUMENTED

A company called **Combmartin Consols Silver-Lead Mining Company** was promoted.

The prospectus described a substantial mineral sett with five lodes and made very optimistic claims about its geological prospects ([Combe Martin Village History](#) Project).

The surviving Exmoor HER identifies the physical remains at approximately **SS 6260 4645** as:

Combmartin Consols / Wheal Vervale ([MDE9012](#)).

Critical Caveat

The 1853 prospectus is an **investor document**.

Its claims about the quality and prospects of the lodes should not automatically be treated as evidence that the mine was productive.

1853-1865 – Combmartin Consols / Wheal Vervale

1853-1865

● DOCUMENTED COMPANY / PROBABLE WORKING

The HER gives the mine a broad working period and states that it **closed in 1865**. Physical remains include spoil heaps, shafts/adit evidence, a dam and leat/water-management features ([MDE9012](#)).

Important Distinction

Company existed: ●

Mining/prospecting occurred: ●

Large-scale successful silver production: ✗ not demonstrated.

1853-1856 – West Challacombe

1853-1854

● DOCUMENTED

Further silver-lead trials were undertaken at **West Challacombe**.

1855-1856

● DOCUMENTED – BUT IRON

The northern part of the sett was being worked as the **North Devon or Combmartin New Iron Mine**. This was iron extraction, not a continuation of the silver operation ([MDE8262](#)).

1859-1867 – Knap Down's Second Major Victorian phase

1859

● DOCUMENTED

The **North Devon Silver-Lead Mining Company** took up Knap Down.

c.1859-1867

DOCUMENTED

Peter Claughton's chronology gives working by the North Devon Silver-Lead Mining Company from **1859 to 1867** (MDV789).

The engine house is associated with this phase, and Historic England dates the surviving engine house to approximately **1859**.

c.1860

DOCUMENTED

Around 1860, the James Sims combined (compound) steam engine was restarted at Knap Down engine house in Combe Martin, Devon, UK.

c.1867-1869

PROBABLE

Commercial mining appears to have continued into approximately **1867-69**, after which trials continued.

The HER specifically says commercial mining ceased around **1869**, while trials continued into the 1890s ([MDV789](#)).

1864-1866 – West Challacombe Revival

1864

DOCUMENTED

The **New Combmartin Silver-Lead Mining Company** reopened/investigated the West Challacombe area.

1864-1866

DOCUMENTED

The venture failed with little or no production. Exmoor HER specifically records this period ([MDE8262](#)).

This is another good example of why “**worked**” doesn't necessarily mean “**productive**.”

1874-1878 – Final West Challacombe attempts

1874 onward

DOCUMENTED

Further attempts were made at West Challacombe.

Companies involved included:

- Combmartin Silver-Lead Mining Co.
- General Mining Investment Co.
- later the West Combe Martin Mining Co (MDE8262 - West Challacombe Mine).

1876-1878

● DOCUMENTED

The **West Combe Martin Mining Co.** was active in this final phase.

The Northern Mine Research Society's company records independently list **West Combemartin Silver Lead Mining Co. Ltd** in 1876. ([Northern Mine Research Society](#))

Result

● DOCUMENTED FAILURE / LITTLE OR NO PRODUCTION

BGS's geological memoir concludes that the West Challacombe workings show no significant mineralisation and should be regarded as an **unsuccessful trial** ([BGS Application Server](#))

1875-1880 – FINAL OLD COMBMARTIN REVIVAL

late 1875

● DOCUMENTED

Speculators began another attempt to revive Old Combmartin.

Contemporary mining journalism reported renewed activity in the district ([Combe Martin Village History](#) Project).

1876

● DOCUMENTED

The **Combmartin Mining Company** reopened the section around **Harris's Shaft**.

The Devon HER and BGS both support this. ([buddlepit.co.uk](#)).

Harris's Shaft

1876-1880

● DOCUMENTED

This is the clearest late phase of the Old Combmartin Mine.

Harris's Shaft reached approximately **73 m / 40 fathoms**, and the principal **Harris's or Combe Martin Lode** was worked from it ([BGS](#)).

The operation lasted approximately four years.

1880

 **DOCUMENTED**

The Harris's Shaft operation ended.

And this is the key point:

Old Combmartin's Mine's major 19th-century history appears not to be 1855-1885.

The best-supported chronology is:

1835-1848 major operation

1876-1880 limited revival

(Martin Ebdon Maps).

1880-1900 – After the Last Serious Mine

1880

 **DOCUMENTED**

A contemporary proposal was still being made to prospect new lodes on the western side of the village.

But this is **prospecting/speculation**, not evidence of a functioning productive mine ([Combe Martin Village History](#) Project).

1880s

 **PROBABLE OR LIMITED TRIALS**

There were further attempts to find workable ore in the district.

However, the evidence indicates that **profitable industrial silver mining had effectively ended by about 1880**. (Combe Martin Village History Project).

1890s

 **DOCUMENTED TRIALS AT KNAP DOWN**

Knap Down apparently saw later prospecting/trials into the 1890s, despite commercial mining having ceased around 1869 ([MDV789](#)).

“Combe Martin Mining Continued Until 1900” is too broad.

A better statement might be:

Commercial silver-lead mining had effectively ended by around 1880, although prospecting/trials and residual mining activity continued in parts of the wider district into the late 19th century.

1900

c.1900

●/● ADMINISTRATIVE ENDPOINT

The Devon HER gives the overall Combe Martin Silver Mines monument a date range of **1292-1902**, describing intermittent working until the beginning of the 20th century (Heritage Gateway).

But this **doesn't mean a productive silver mine was operating in 1900-1902.**

It's a monument/archaeological record date range.

That's an important distinction.

The Seven Sites Separated

Site	What it actually was	Secure working chronology
Old Combmartin Mine	Main historic mine under/around village	1292-96; 1320s-30; intermittent later; 1528; 1587-94; 1640s; 18th C; 1813-17; 1835-48; 1876-80
Fayes Mine	Probable name for part of Elizabethan workings	1587-94, ● identification not certain
William's Shaft	Shaft within Old Combmartin	18th-C predecessor; enlarged/deepened 19th C; major engine 1837
Harris's Shaft	Major shaft/lode within Old Combmartin	principal 19th-C workings; major revival 1876-80
Knap Down Mine	Separate major mine east of Old Combmartin	ancient/uncertain; 1836-46; 1848-c.1850; c.1850-59; 1859-c.1867/69; trials later
West Challacombe	Separate mining sett west/northwest of village	1790-92 trials; 1843-45; 1853-54; 1864-66; 1873-78
Combmartin Consols / Wheal Vervale	Separate mine near Verwill Lane/Trentishoe	19th-C; company promoted 1853; closed 1865

([MDV12545 - Come Martin Silver Mines](#)).

An Argument Against the Popular Narrative

Combe Martin has a documented history of silver-lead mining from 1292, preceded possibly by earlier medieval workings. The Crown's initial operation lasted only until about 1296, followed by renewed private exploitation in the 1320s.

Mining remained intermittent. A major revival occurred in the Elizabethan period, particularly from 1587 to the 1590s, when the workings associated with Sir Bevis Bulmer produced the district's most significant early silver output.

Further attempts occurred in the 17th and 18th centuries. Old Combmartin was reopened in 1813-17 and, much more successfully, from 1835-48, when the Williams/Harris shaft system and steam pumping were developed and a rich orebody was exploited.

Knap Down formed a separate major mine and was worked through several companies from 1836 into the 1860s.

West Challacombe was another separate sett, subjected to repeated largely unsuccessful trials from the 1790s through the 1870s. Old Combmartin was briefly revived around Harris's Shaft in 1876-80. Commercial silver-lead mining then effectively ended, although limited prospecting and trials persisted into the late 19th century.

BGS Geological Memoir

The **BGS geological memoir** provides a very useful independent check on the mine layout. It identifies **Harris's/Combe Martin Lode** as the principal orebody and says it was worked from Harris's Shaft to approximately **73 m**, while also identifying North Lode and South Lode.

It separately concludes that the West Challacombe workings were an unsuccessful trial ([BGS](#)).

We can now distinguish **the historical names from the actual geological workings**, which is often where local mining histories become confused.

The next really useful step would be to reconstruct **a map of Old Combmartin showing William's Shaft, Harris's Shaft, Director's Shaft, Mine Tenement, the Harris/Combe Martin Lode, North/South Lodes, Knap Down and the West Challacombe sett**, with the historical companies and dates overlaid.

That would make the relationships between all these names much clearer.

Note: The historical summaries, chronologies, and mining site interpretations presented in this document and on our website reflect our independent synthesis and consolidation of surviving documentary sources, geological reports, and specialist research.

Please Note the Following:

- **No Guarantees of Accuracy:** While every effort has been made to cross-reference historical records, Historic Environment Records (HER), and geological literature, historical research is subject to ongoing discovery and interpretation. We provide no guarantees regarding the absolute completeness, accuracy, or finality of the information provided.
- **Consolidated Interpretation:** Views expressed on site identities, working dates, and operational boundaries (such as distinguishing specific shafts from independent setts) represent our best analytical interpretation and do not constitute an official record.
- **Fieldwork & Safety Warning:** Historical mining landscapes contain hidden shafts, unstable ground, and hazardous structures. The information on this site is provided for historical context only and should not be used as a guide for physical exploration or site access.

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